

Socrates and Xenophon

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The chance to look at a person or event through the eyes of more than one source is valuable to classicists and ancient historians. Here we see Socrates, a figure whom different authors seem to adapt to fit their needs.

Few figures from Classical Athens have shared the fame enjoyed by the fifth-century B.C. sage Socrates. From the religious martyr of the 18th-century French writer Voltaire's play *Socrates* to the kindly guru of the 1989 film *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, Socrates continues to reappear, always reinterpreted to perform a particular role. This enduring prominence is particularly striking when we remember that no writings attributed to the man himself remain, and even the surviving accounts from Classical antiquity cast light on him from different angles. This is a philosopher who, apparently deliberately, left no record of his own thought or life. *All* the evidence by which we attempt to construct an understanding of this protean figure is given to us (at least) second-hand.

Of course, this evidence includes some brilliant works. On the one hand, we have Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a blistering attack on the dangers of relativistic argument, with Socrates as the figurehead of a potentially corrupting new way of thinking. On the other, we have the dialogues of his student Plato, in which Socrates often plays the unsettling yet seductive role of moral inquisitor, trying to lead his young companions towards an understanding of the importance of self-knowledge. Then, of course, we have the bridesmaid of the Socratic tradition: another of Socrates' pupils, Xenophon. Xenophon's accounts of Socrates may, as we shall see, have come to seem rather secondary to Plato's – but it is worth reminding ourselves that the opportunity to compare primary ancient sources who actually knew the subject of their writing is very rare, and the chance to read variant versions of Socrates ought to help us to get closer to a three-dimensional understanding of this remarkable figure.

Xenophon and Plato on Socrates: spot the difference

Like Plato, Xenophon, active in the early fourth century B.C., wrote an *Apology* (Socrates' defence at his trial) and a

Symposium (a dramatized account of a dinner party at which Socrates was among the guests). In addition, he produced the *Memorabilia* (a collection of Socratic dialogues) and *Oeconomicus* (another dialogue, about agriculture and household management). These four works, along with a brief mention of Socrates in the *Anabasis* (3.1), are Xenophon's Socratic writings.

The fortune of these texts is curious. In antiquity they seem to have been treated as relatively authoritative, playing a significant role in shaping the responses to Socrates identifiable within Hellenistic philosophical movements such as Cynicism and Stoicism. More recently, however, Xenophon's Socratic writings have been somewhat maligned. Often criticisms of Xenophon's Socratic writings are founded on the irresistible comparison with Plato. It is often said that Plato's Socrates is exciting, innovative, and philosophically sophisticated. In contrast, Xenophon's Socrates is often characterized as traditional, platitudinous, and philosophically dull.

This perceived difference doesn't just motivate the preference of some (perhaps even most) scholars for Plato's Socrates over Xenophon's, it is also presented as evidence for the greater *historical* value of Plato's texts. One common claim is that Plato's exciting and sophisticated Socrates is far more likely than Xenophon's stickler for tradition to have had the enormous influence (on people like Plato...) that *the* historical Socrates clearly had; therefore Plato's Socrates is more likely to be the historical Socrates. This, in turn, is used as an argument for preferring Plato's evidence on those points where Plato and Xenophon seem to be in direct disagreement about the details of Socrates' life.

Straightforward history or interpretation?

It is perhaps only natural that scholars should be unable to resist the search for an historical Socrates lurking behind these

ancient sources. In fact, the question is particularly pressing for those scholars who, reading Plato, wish to know how much of the philosophy voiced by Socrates is Plato's own and how much is influenced by or directly received from his teacher. However, in focusing on this historical question (the so-called 'Socratic Problem'), scholars run the risk of assuming too much. For what is not clear, when reading either Plato or Xenophon (or, indeed, Aristophanes), is that either was setting out to present an *historical* record of Socrates' life. Indeed, there is good reason to think that both these authors (along with the other authors or Socratic texts now lost to us) were aiming not to write a biography of Socrates, but rather to *interpret* his life and teachings in the way that was appropriate to their own intellectual interests.

If Xenophon and Plato are not trying to achieve the same end with their writings, then it seems misplaced to compare them in terms of how well they achieve one particular goal, i.e. the goal of giving a historically accurate account of Socratic philosophy. If Xenophon's Socrates is less philosophically exciting than Plato's perhaps this is not because Xenophon was unable to understand Socrates' philosophy, but rather that he was interested in developing other aspects of the Socratic persona for his own purposes.

So why did Xenophon write about Socrates?

What is the purpose of Xenophon's Socratic writings? Well, Xenophon does begin his *Apology* with a hint that he wants to *explain* why Socrates spoke as he did at the trial in 399 B.C., where he was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and of impiety, and was eventually convicted and sentenced to death. Xenophon suggests that there were already several versions of his speech circulating in Athens. At the beginning of the *Memorabilia*, which also treats the trial, he points to a desire to explain why the Athenians came to believe the charges against Socrates. Xenophon seems to want both to explain why people took against Socrates and to defend Socrates against his fatal reputation. In doing so, he offers a Socrates who seems to present less of a challenge to

Athenian traditions and, in particular, religion, than Plato's version. In addition, this Socrates seems to be relatively happy to offer advice (in a way that Plato's does not).

Now, for readers steeped in Plato, appeal to authority and a willingness to tell other people what to do are the antithesis of philosophy. Plato has Socrates show us that philosophy is about challenging unjustified claims to expertise, questioning authority and pushing ourselves (via argument) to reach our own independent understanding about what matters. It is not hard to see why those who buy into such an understanding are tempted to characterize Xenophon's Socrates as 'unphilosophical'.

However, if we are prepared to put aside our assumptions about what philosophy should look like and look again at Xenophon's texts, we can find something more than a mundane attempt to save Socrates from his dangerous reputation. In fact, Xenophon's Socrates does offer philosophy. He does so, not by *arguing* for the importance of self-knowledge (as Plato's Socrates does), but rather by *personifying* in his own character and conduct a commitment to self-control. This seems to have been an aspect of Socrates that particularly interested Xenophon, a military man who endured the leadership of a gruelling march back to Greece from the wreckage of a campaign in Mesopotamia.

A marriage made in ... philosophy?

There are lots of occasions where the theme of training oneself in self-control crops up in Xenophon's Socratic writings. One in particular is interesting because it also serves to determine the reputation of another interesting figure, Socrates' wife Xanthippe. In the *Symposium* (2.9–10), Socrates and his companions have been watching some dancing girls perform a particularly impressive routine. Socrates claims that the skill of the performance is evidence that a woman's nature is not inferior to a man's (except in decision-making and physical strength). So, he suggests, any man can confidently train his wife in whatever he feels she needs to know.

There are intriguing echoes here of the qualified approval of female potential that we find in Plato's *Republic*, but particularly interesting is how the conversation continues. Antisthenes responds to Socrates' advice on marital relations by asking:

If that is your perception, Socrates, how come you don't teach Xanthippe, instead of having as your wife the most difficult woman not just of this generation, in my view, but of all the generations past and yet to come? (2.10)

To which Socrates replies:

'It's because I can see that people who want to be horse-trainers pick not the most docile animals but the most spirited. They reckon that if they can establish control of them, they'll easily manage the rest. I chose my wife because of my desire for human society and conversation, knowing very well that if I can endure her, I can easily get along with everyone else.' And these words seemed to be not far off the mark. (2.10; translations from Bowen's Aris and Phillips edition)

This passage from Xenophon does not present the kind of sophisticated arguments about causation, knowledge, or ethics that we find in Plato. On one reading, it simply presents some rather ungallant sniping by Socrates' friends about his wife. On another reading, however, this passage is philosophically significant. Antisthenes points to a potential inconsistency between Socrates' advice and his life. If wives can be trained, why does Socrates *endure* Xanthippe rather than train her to be different? Socrates' response, however, indicates that his life and his philosophy are entirely consistent; he uses his marriage as preliminary training for his philosophical endeavours. Socrates' choice of wife is directly connected to his ethical project – he is truly *living* his philosophy.

Whether we want to classify Xenophon's Socratic writing as philosophical or not will depend on our preconceptions about what counts as philosophy. It may be that Xenophon was less interested in rehearsing questions about the nature of knowledge and more concerned with presenting a paradigm of how to incorporate a commitment to self-control into one's everyday life – even if that life seems, by comparison with other accounts of Socrates, relatively conventional or conservative. Whether this was a genuine Socratic commitment remains impossible to judge. The ways in which Xenophon's Socrates differs from Plato's don't make his accounts inferior or less true, they simply make him worth reading on his own terms – and they remind us that ancient accounts, like writing of any age, have agendas, preoccupations, and interests of their own. By giving us the chance to compare different accounts, Xenophon enriches our understanding not just of Socrates, but of ancient philosophical writing and the ways in which we can approach it.

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Xenophon on Socrates – *Memorabilia* I.i-ii.

I can, therefore, but repeat my former words. It is a marvel to me how the Athenians came to be persuaded that Socrates fell short of sober-mindedness as touching the gods. A man who never ventured one impious word or deed against the gods we worship, but whose whole language concerning them, and his every act, closely coincided, word for word, and deed for deed, with all we deem distinctive of the most devout piety.

No less surprising to my mind is the belief that Socrates corrupted the young. This man, who, beyond what has been already stated, kept his appetites and passions under strict control, who was pre-eminently capable of enduring winter's cold and summer's heat and every kind of toil, who was so schooled to curtail his needs that with the scantiest of means he never lacked sufficiency – is it credible that such a man could have made others irreverent or lawless, or licentious, or effeminate in face of toil? Was he not rather the saving of many through the passion for virtue which he roused in them, and the hope he infused that through careful management of themselves they might grow to be truly beautiful and good – not indeed that he ever undertook to be a teacher of virtue, but being evidently virtuous himself he made those who associated with him hope that by imitating they might at last resemble him.